

Star Comment

A nefarious NHS agenda

GOVERNMENT efforts to play down the proportion of NHS contracts in England snapped up by the private sector are disingenuous and intended to mask its nefarious agenda.

But for British Medical Journal (BMJ) determination to use freedom of information legislation to expose reality, the public would still be in the dark.

The government is content to collude with the private sector and to hide behind the veil of corporate confidentiality to obscure the scale of its depletion of the public purse.

The Department of Health seeks to camouflage the scale of private-sector penetration of our national health service by insisting that private companies account for just 6 per cent of NHS expenditure.

However, the real scale of the danger emerges as the BMJ reveals that the private sector has won 41 per cent of contracts awarded via competitive tender against just 30 per cent for NHS providers.

This is because of the different priorities of private and public health bodies.

Public bodies care for sick people while private companies prioritise winning profitable contracts in the interests of their shareholders.



Clinical commissioning groups (CCG) imposed on the NHS by a radical top-down reorganisation, which both the Tories and Liberal Democrats had pledged not to introduce, are pressed to award contracts on a best value basis.

Not surprisingly, this works to the benefit of profits-first outfits prepared to cut right, left and centre to offer a lower quote.

Ministers point to CCGs as putting doctors in charge of placing contracts, but most of this work is outsourced to shadowy and secretive "commissioning support services" that are immune to the Freedom of Information Act.

The NHS is wholly funded by the taxpayer, so the public ought to be in a position to examine contracts to judge how their money is being spent.

However, this doesn't suit the interests of the privateers and their parliamentary representatives.

We are constantly told that funding is tight and that all expenditure must be closely monitored, but that doesn't apply to the rocketing employment of consultants by NHS England, more than doubling over the past four years to £640 million a year.



Labour's shadow health secretary Andy Burnham is correct to conclude that the BMJ figures "blow apart Jeremy Hunt's claim that 'NHS privatisation isn't happening.' It is happening and it is happening on his watch."

Burnham demanded a moratorium on new NHS private-sector contracts back in July in view of what he identified plainly as its "forced privatisation."

He voiced concern then about a number of substantial and controversial contracts that were up for grabs and would last over five years, tying the hands of a new government for its entire term in office.

Just how single-minded the Tories and Liberal Democrats are in privatising our NHS was made evident last month when NHS England announced plans for a £1 billion contract to provide primary care support services that excluded bids from public-sector bodies.

Commercial front-runners to gobble up this bonanza included US military supplier Lockheed Martin and G4S, which is one of the small cabal of conglomerates favoured by government for public contracts despite, as the Commons public accounts committee reported on Tuesday, being under investigation for fraud.

NHS privatisation is developing at runaway speed. Unless the conservative coalition is kicked out next May, the jewel in the crown of the post-war Labour government will no longer exist.

THERE was a fascinating moment during the Human Effects of Nuclear Weapons Conference in Vienna on Tuesday.

The British delegation's surprising but nevertheless welcome attendance was called upon to make a government statement.

Essentially the British position was support for a nuclear-free world, pointing out Britain's continuing support for the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and its reduction in the number of nuclear warheads it holds.

In response to the many demands for a nuclear weapons convention and a global treaty to ban all nuclear weapons, the British government's position is that a timetabled mechanism to make weapons illegal would risk instability and a loss of trust.

This unsurprising statement was received in stony silence by a very large conference.

The South African representative proudly announced that South Africa was the first and only state ever to develop nuclear weapons, then voluntarily decommission them and declare itself a non-nuclear country, as well as then joining the NPT process as such.

He went on to say how Africa had thus become a nuclear weapons-free continent, expressing his belief that possession of nuclear weapons created instability around the world.

In conclusion he described the possession of weapons by the five permanent members of the security council plus four other states to be a form of nuclear apartheid.

South Africa's moral and principled position received loud and sustained applause, not just from civil society organisations but also from many states which were represented at the conference.

At the end of Monday's presentations by esteemed nuclear scientists and medical experts led by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the chair asked for questions only from state delegations.

The US delegation was called first and calmly told the assembled gathering that they weren't going to ask any questions but that they would make a statement.

The ambassador said the US recognised the environmental effects of nuclear explosions, supported a comprehensive test ban treaty and drew attention to President Barack Obama's relevant speeches in Prague and elsewhere.

To growing scepticism the ambassador went on to say that the US was driven by a real enthusiasm to achieve a nuclear-free world but could not support a convention or treaty with a fixed timeline for the achievement of the nuclear-free world it claims to want.

The conference was preceded by an excellent weekend gathering of 500 supporters of the International Campaign for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons, held at one of the historic university buildings in central Vienna.

It was impressive in its attendance, but perhaps even more impressive was the youth and enthusiasm of people from all over the world who were campaigning for a global nuclear weapons treaty.

The Austrian government, which organised the conference, had gone to great pains to ensure that the state representatives were appropriately

seated in proper conference format in one of the grand halls of the Hofburg Palace. Behind them was a big media attendance and the rest of the hall was taken up with a huge contingent of peace campaign and civil society organisations from all over the world.

We were welcomed to the palace by a large group of Red Cross rescue workers dressed as if they were trying to rescue people from a nuclear explosion, and they remained and took part in the conference for the next two days.

The ICRC information paper included many photos of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and outlined the effects and casualties of the heat and blast waves.

The heat casualties alone were documented as: "The earth below the epicentre of the blast would be heated to a temperature of approximately 7,000°C, which would vaporise all living things in that area."

"Tens of thousands of those people

WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

NUKES CONSIDER THE

JEREMY CORBYN reports from the Human Effects of Nuclear Weapons Conference in Vienna that Britain and the US have been refusing

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who will not have been vaporised would be burnt, with most people suffering horrific full thickness skin burns. Severe burns could occur up to 3km from the blast.

"In addition, many people looking in the direction of the explosion would suffer temporary flash blindness for up to 40 minutes or even permanent eye damage, including retinal burns and scarring affecting the visual field, from looking at the fireball with the naked eye."

A cold analysis of the levels of death and destruction from a nuclear explosion is truly frightening.

A number of very well-presented papers pointed out that even a limited nuclear war would result in enormous climate change, as darkened skies would lead to a rapid cooling of the Earth's temperature, damaging agriculture and fish stocks.

"The radiation levels would last for years and lead to huge refugee movements and civil unrest all over the planet. However, there have